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ABSTRACT

The term "Community Relations" is descriptive of the way of life for a school administrator in a small district where administrators are closer to the public. Community relations is more than just a steady stream of news releases or articles published in the annual town report. Community relations is (1) the total effort that an administrator makes to establish two-way communications between the school and all of the publics in the school attendance area, and (2) the actual relationships that exist as a result of those efforts. School administrators must never become so self-centered that they forget that they work for and with the community and the children, and not the opposite. Community relations can be either good or bad. A classic example of bad public relations is the school district that breaks its back communicating to the public, but hears very little from its constituents. Administrators must be accessible, receptive, and able to take action to correct errors and resolve problems. Because times are tough, educators must rely more on locally available resources and the process will create more school-community interaction. While all school personnel have a public relations function, the backbone of community relations is the attitude of the administrator. (BRR)

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COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

By

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New Hampshire

October 30, 1981

Paper presented at the Annual American Association of School Administrators (114th, New Orleans, LA, February 26-March 1, 1982.

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COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The term "Community relations", in my opinion, is descriptive of the way of life for a school administrator in a small district. Community relations is more than just a steady stream of news releases; or photographs; or congratulatory letters to merit scholars and scholarship recipients; or brief statements on local radio stations; or articles published in the annual town report; or luncheon meetings with the senior citizens; or slide shows at the local service club meeting; or school newsletters; or spaghetti suppers at the school. Those are all terrific techniques, or practices, but beyond those things I believe that community relations is

1. the total effort that an administrator makes to establish two-way communications between the schools and all of the publics in the school attendance area; and

2. the actual relationship that exists as a result of his/her efforts (it's the two-way street that you build).

We school administrators must never become so self-centered that we forget that we only work for and with the community and the children and that they do not just exist for us. After all, the public school system is founded on the premise that it will be controlled by local laymen (and not its employees). I mention this because we need to constantly remind ourselves that our community relations can either be good or bad (I classify mediocre community relations on the bad side).

A classic example of bad public or community relations is the school district that breaks its back communicating <u>to</u> the public, but hears very little <u>from</u> its constituents. Some might consider that district to be lucky - "no news is good news". Not so! I maintain that the district that operates a one-way communications program is in trouble. Something is always festering out there, and if you haven't established a clearly defined access route for people to express their views that bubbling cauldron of unrest can explode in your face.

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In a small district such as the one in which I am employed, the people have to know that there is someone with whom they can talk (I suppose that can also be said of large districts as well), but we are closer to the folks in small districts. Quite often it may be me, or one of the building principals. On troublesome issues, most people aren't satisfied unless they can get to the top - so we have to be accessible and receptive. Many issues aren't really issues once people have had their say, which is one more reason why we need to be accessible. Being a good listener also helps.

Being able to take action to correct errors and to resolve problems is also a great relations-builder. I believe that if we treat complainants with all of the due process kinds of procedures that we provide parents of handicapped children we would not only resolve problems in a fair and equitable manner, but we would also gain some converts during the process.

Is there a school district anywhere in the country that doesn't have a group of people out there who are continuously taking pot shots at some clearly identifiable problem area? I don't believe there is such a district, but I do believe that if we all jumped aboard a bus and went out to any district "in trouble" and helped resolve one problem(let's say we cured the smoking in the lavatories by being monitors for six hours per day) the malcontents would immediately jump to a new issue. Some people are not happy unless they are bitching about something! The important message here is that as long as we keep the communications channels open between ourselves and those folks, and as long as we hear their complaints and make genuine efforts to resolve them, and as long as we tell everyone how we plan to attack the problems, we cannot lose the war. We'll win a lot of battles, but the war will never end.

At this point I want to refer back to the two categories in which I placed community relations:

1. The administrator's efforts to establish two-way communications; and

2. The resultant relationships that exist.

Because I have been emphasizing accessibility it may seem to you that I do not believe that strongly in all of the communications techniques that exist and are available to us. On the contrary I believe that the entire spectrum of communications ideas is a basic part of this entire concept. Without that kind of ammunition in your arsenal the job cannot be done. Rather than go on for hours listing all of the "things" that one can do to promote community relations I will mention that the National School Public Relations Association (John Wherry is the Executive Director) exists to help school administrators provide better, more meaningful approaches to public information dissemination. If you are not familiar with NSPRA, they have a large booth at this convention every year and are located in the same headquarters building as AASA in Arlington, Virginia.

The second category (resultant relationships) is the two-way street that I mentioned earlier. There is no perfect school district, but the ones that are much closer to perfection are those which tell their constituents both good and not so good things that exist in the schools. Those districts also have employees who are willing to listen to the taxpayers' complaints (praises, too) and who promise to try to improve things. And then, too, there are the districts that follow through on those promises.

Therein lies the community credibility that we are all striving to establish. The rewards in this profession are oftentimes intangible and insufficient, but if you and I can be said to be "fair and honest and hard-working" by our clients, we are way up on the community relations ladder - and still climbing.

When I was preparing these remarks I stopped at this very point to reflect and to have my secretary type what I had written. When she completed the typing and brought it in to me I asked her if it made sense to her. She said yes, but she wondered if I would accept a comment. Naturally, I agreed, and she proceeded to tell me that she felt that the attitude of the superintendent or the building principal toward the public actually filters through to the other people who work in the offices or the schools. In other words, if you are open-minded, willing to listen to gripes, courteous to irate taxpayers, and as helpful as you can be to visitors to your offices, it becomes contagious. Your staff will take its cue from you, and treat people exactly as you would do.

After all, when you are not in on a given day it is your secretary or your clerk typist or an aide who answers the phone and bears the brunt of the irate mother or father. They have to know how to defuse that kind of anger when you are not available, and one of the very best, most positive community relations representatives you can ever have is the person who handles your telephone.

It is a proven fact of life that one of the best known people you have working in your school district is the building secretary. That is why it is so vital to your community relations effort to have friendly people in those positions. You cannot hire Granny Grinch in the front office and expect to win friends and influence people!

Similarly, you should anticipate that your custodians, bus drivers, teacher aides, cafeteria workers, and teachers are going to have a lot of interaction with the public. They need to know that they are an important cog in your operations, and they also need to know that their attitudes can make the difference in how your community feels about the schools.

In summary, my message to you about community relations is to leave no stones unturned in attempting to implement every known community relations technique in the book. What you do will be believable to your public if you believe that it makes a difference. I am convinced that the backbone of your entire community relations is what my secretary so nicely identified - the attitude of the boss!

So far, so good. Given a lot of warm sunny days all of the things I have mentioned will work like a charm. What happens, though, on the "rainy" days we experience? Sometimes we create our own rainy days by just being non-communicative, and then there are the circumstantial situations that none of us can avoid. There is no simple answer to solving community relations problems that arise. The best remedy anyone could offer you would be the old saying "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". Work hard at preventing your problems and you may find they become fewer and fewer. Again, use all of the community relations skills and techniques you have available to accomplish the "ounce of prevention".

Before closing my remarks, I want to make some about the future. In New Hampshire we have, at the state level, a person who focuses almost all of his time on the topic of Community/School Partnerships in problem solving.

We believe that community relations cannot just be telling the folks about the good things we do now and have always done - that passive approach just doesn't seem to work anymore, at least all by itself!

In education we are very rapidly finding out that we are going to have to rely on locally available resources much more than we have had to do in the past. Because times are tough, we are going to have to take a much more aggressive leadership role in helping our communities make use of non tax-related resources - service clubs, industry, the elderly or retired, working non-parents, and other publics. We have to give them a piece of the action and it has to logically be a piece of the educational task with which they can help us. They may call it an investment of their time and effort, but it boils down to an investment <u>in</u> our kids.

We will be asking community people to give up some of their time to help in the schools; what <u>we</u> will be giving up is the exclusive control over everyone in the school building. We'll be farming out a lot of enrichment aspects of the curriculum, but we will be gaining a lot of very positive role models from all kinds of backgrounds. The teachers of tomorrow may become expert integrators who, through careful planning, may help children tie together all of the loose ends of strands of learning that are acquired outside the classroom.

Does this sound a little bit like Alvin Toffler? In his most recent book The Third Wave he predicts more learning outside the classroom, fewer years of compulsory schooling, desegregation of the young and the old; and closer ties between education and work.

All of the aforementioned, in a nutshell, is what is slowly but surely happening in New Hampshire. Last year's runner-up to the Teacher of the Year is a third grade teacher who sends most of her class out into the community one afternoon per week for a variety of educational experiences. That demands a great deal of coordination and integrating on her part.

Being a role model for children it appears is no longer going to be the sole responsibility of the teacher. If this is going to be the future of community relations, then let's make the most of it.

Philip J. Dahlinger

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